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week 5 :: ubiquitous computing

Ubiquitous Computing, Weiser 1993

Perspectives article for ACM Interactions, Weiser 1993

The coming age of calm technology, Weiser & Seely Brown, 1996

i'm deeply encouraged by mark weiser's vision of the ideal, information-rich interaction with our environment. i feel as though multiple machines and gadgets (and the pesky maintenance of such objects through power, memory, constant-carrying, etc) get the better of us, and the benefits to the technology are filtered through the clunky interface or division of attention. invisibility is paramount: i'd rather sit in a chair and have it automatically adjust to optimal comfort and configuration than fiddle with a lot of buttons and knobs; i'd like to be able to access what i need to see without having to attend to hundred other displays. periphery + the everyday seem to be the natural solution for our human perception to keep up.

the three obstacles to true ubicomp that weiser ennumerates seem to still be extant: (1) great need for copious wireless bandwidth, (2) dealing with roaming issues and changing addresses for mobile devices, and (3) immobility of current windows systems. even though he writes this in 1993, 12 years later we're still suffering from difficulties. perhaps the situation is not so dire as it was back then, but the infrastructure for the seamless, controllable, always-at-hand technology is still lacking. therein lies the difficulty of HCI development: the user interfaces might be conceptually sound, but implementing them on PDAs or mobile phones or screens-on-random-surface gives a cursory spin on tired systems. what could be a useful way of exploring or researching ubicomp interfaces without being visibly hindered by technological hurdles? are there ways to overcome them by sharing spaces with other ubiquitous things like electricity or writing?

i love his proposal of 'childhood' as the theme for the future of ubicomp. this really takes into account the emotional and sensory pleasure of good design, not merely informational overload or straight-forward tools for the tasks. we should have more delight in the everyday moments, incorporating discovery and pleasure into the necessary and purposeful.